

Making a Makeshift Living

By **Catherine Warmerdam** and **Photography by Terence Duffy** - April 26, 2018



PAUL BALTIMORE NEVER EXPECTED that he'd have to cobble together teaching gigs at three different community colleges to earn a living. Baltimore, who holds a doctorate from UC Santa Barbara and is an expert in the history of U.S. foreign relations, commutes via light rail and bus from his home in Sacramento to his teaching assignments at Folsom Lake, Cosumnes River and Sacramento City colleges. Three times he was a finalist for a full-time position, but he hasn't landed a permanent job yet.

"I'm at a point where a lot of part-timers get. It's a grueling process to go through the whole interview process and not get it," says Baltimore. "There's no direct path to a full-time job. I'm hunkered down as a part-timer."

Baltimore is not alone. Nationwide, roughly half of the teaching staff on today's college campuses are contingent faculty, although they go by different names—adjuncts, temporary faculty, contract instructors—depending on who you talk to. At Los Rios Community College District, where contingent faculty are restricted to part-time assignments, the preferred term is *adjunct*, but Baltimore argues it's a misnomer.

"The word adjunct bothers a lot of teachers because it's a concept that is outdated," explains Baltimore. "It was created to refer to a person who has a full-time job and just teaches a class here and there because they're an expert. That's all changed over the past 50 years." Increasingly, adjunct appointments aren't add-ons to a full-time job elsewhere. "It's what people do for a living."

Sarah Strand, an instructor at Sacramento State, where part-time and full-time contract instructors are referred to as lecturers or temporary faculty, also takes issue with the terminology. "To refer to them as part-timers is a misnomer because there are full-time lecturers," she says. "When you call lecturers part-timers, it conjures up the image of a McDonald's burger flipper or a Subway sandwich maker." The term *temporary*, meanwhile, suggests impermanence, "even though there are lecturers who have worked there for decades."

TITLES ASIDE, contingent faculty make up a substantial part of the teaching workforce on college campuses. At Sac State, more than half of the instructors working in fall 2017 were lecturers (both part-time and full-

time). At Los Rios, meanwhile, approximately 30 percent of the courses are taught by adjunct faculty—a lower percentage than at the majority of California community colleges, administrators note. At UC Davis, just 20 percent of instructors are untenured.

The use of contract labor is a growing trend, not just in education but across employment sectors. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, approximately 40 percent of the U.S. workforce was considered contingent in 2017.

“It’s a gigantic problem nationwide that transcends teaching,” contends Baltimore. “Over the last couple of decades, there’s been this move away from full-time permanent positions to temporary, part-time contract employees. The idea now that you can get a full-time job is like a remote dream. I think lawmakers need to be vigilant about the exploitation that this is creating.”

The use of contingent faculty gives institutes of higher education a level of flexibility that they argue is necessary in these uncertain budgetary times. “Every single one of the CSUs has tightened belts,” says Brian Oppy, associate vice president in the Office of Faculty Advancement at Sac State. “Committing to hiring a faculty member is a long-term commitment. You don’t take that kind of a chance with your budget and hope that you’ll be better funded next year.”

Temporary appointments also allow schools to fill a position on relatively short notice—for example, if a class has unexpectedly high enrollment. “Having people who are not on the tenure line helps us to pivot a little more quickly,” explains Oppy. Whereas a tenure position can take a year or more to fill, lecturers can be assigned in a fraction of that time. “And in some cases you might bring in somebody who turns out to be the perfect candidate for the future tenure-track job in that same area.”

That is the case at Los Rios, according to Ryan Cox, the district’s associate vice chancellor of human resources. “When you look at our hiring stats for full-time professors, 60 percent came from the Los Rios adjunct faculty ranks,” he explains. “We’d like to think we’ve done a real good job of professional development for our adjuncts, respecting the work that they’ve done and providing opportunity.”

An argument can also be made that diversity is easier to achieve with contingent faculty compared with the traditional tenure route, particularly at community colleges. “We tend to have the ability to diversify our faculty to match our student population by bringing adjuncts through and mentoring them so that they can get full-time positions,” says Jamey Nye, vice chancellor of education and technology at Los Rios.

Contingent assignments are also an opportunity to get teachers with real-world experience and niche areas of expertise into the classroom in a streamlined fashion. Nye points to “dozens and dozens of programs where we really want expertise from industry.” For example, the district hired a retired fire chief to teach a fire technology course and regularly brings in experts in computer information science to teach tech courses. “With adjuncts, you can get someone of that caliber who’s retired or working in industry, and they still meet all the same minimum qualifications as other faculty.”

But just as colleges and universities can grow their faculty with ease through the use of contingent positions, so too can they shrink their ranks on short notice, and that concerns many instructors whose job security isn’t protected by tenure.

“This is the biggest problem with the whole part-time system,” says Baltimore. “It’s not wages. It’s the total job insecurity, and it happens like three times a year where you don’t know if you’re going to be able to pay rent. Adjunct is defined as a temporary contract employee with no expectation of being hired back from semester to semester.”

Strand, who has a doctorate in behavioral neuroscience and teaches several different courses in the psychology department, agrees. Although she has secured a three-year appointment as a lecturer at Sac State, “the lack of stability is really challenging,” Strand says. “At the end of my three-year period, they have every option not to hire me back. This is an issue that we feel really strongly about, and we are working hard to provide more stability for lecturers in our next contract negotiations.”

Strand goes one step further, arguing that the designations of “permanent” and “contingent” faculty in the CSU system are harmful. “I fully appreciate the difference between research faculty and teaching faculty,” says Strand. “But the designation between temporary and permanent institutes a hierarchy in the university.” That hierarchy, she asserts, “affects faculty working conditions, and that’s going to affect student learning conditions.”



Instructor Sarah Strand, who secured a three-year appointment at Sac State, reports that the lack of stability is very challenging. “At the end of my three-year period, they have every option not to hire me back.”

Administrators, meanwhile, contend that schools do their best to plan schedules with as much advance notice to contingent faculty as possible. “I was always aware of that insecurity as a department chair,” says Oppy. “We don’t make decisions that are likely to wind up with somebody not getting the work that’s expected.”

Oppy points to summer classes as a particular challenge because enrollment is unpredictable. “Absolutely it’s the case that in some circumstances we aren’t making perfect predictions,” he says. “We try to give people a heads up that something might not go. It’s a horrible thing to say to someone, ‘I thought you were going to be able to have three classes but it turns out it’s only going to be two. I’ve just chopped your salary by one-third.’” Although Oppy contends such situations are in the “small minority,” he admits “it can be very painful for that individual.”

Margarita Berta-Avila, an education professor at Sac State and chapter president of the California Faculty Association, the labor organization representing tenure-line faculty and lecturers, says that job insecurity is top of mind for many instructors. “I can’t tell you how many colleagues we have writing and saying they’re afraid they’re not going to have classes to teach,” she says. “You can imagine the anxiety they have semester by semester. There are some guarantees if a lecturer has a three-year contract, but there’s still always that anxiety.”

IN ADDITION TO JOB INSECURITY, contingent faculty argue that pay is often inadequate, especially given the level of education required for teaching positions in higher education. A first-time lecturer with a master's degree teaching two classes can expect to make around \$9,500 a semester at Sac State. Meanwhile, a lecturer holding a terminal degree such as a doctorate along with some years of teaching experience and carrying a full five-course load could bring home around \$71,000 annually.

Lynda Radican, a longtime lecturer who teaches writing and children's classic literature, has a three-year appointment at Sac State but still struggles because of the "meager wages."

"The department has been very good to me and I've been very happy there, but that said, with 30 years in the workforce with a master's degree and almost a Ph.D., I make \$60,000 a year," she says. "That's not a whole lot of money. For me, working all those years underpaid and paying back student loans, then finding myself near 60, divorced, with an aging mother to care for, I couldn't keep my house."

There is a stepped pay scale and preference list in place to reward lecturers who have seniority, but Radican says many instructors' paychecks still come up short. "Because of how long I've been there, I've moved through the ranks of higher pay, but I've got a colleague who's been there for 18 years and is 63 years old and makes under \$50,000."

Although lecturer pay in the CSU system is aligned with the hourly rate of tenure-line professors, Radican says the expectations for how much time is consumed by work outside the classroom is unrealistic. "The bean counters consider a three-unit class to be the equivalent of eight hours a week, and that would include teaching time, office hours and all your prep and grading," says Radican, who currently teaches four classes. With 30 students per class, "paper grading is a tremendous amount of work."

School administrators, meanwhile, argue that their hands are tied because budgets are tight. "Our budget is not near what it was in 2000, let alone in 1990. When you account for inflation and the number of students we're covering, we're running way behind," says Oppy. "The question is, where is it gonna give with these budgetary instabilities? The reality is that these are contract workers; they're employed for a certain period of time. I'd like to believe that people who are doing it this way recognize the reality of this."



Brian Oppy, associate vice president in the Office of Faculty Advancement at Sac State, says the use of temporary faculty gives the university necessary flexibility in uncertain budgetary times, and allows schools to fill a position on short notice.

OVERALL WORKING CONDITIONS—and how those conditions affect students—are another concern among contingent faculty. Instructors are sometimes unable to secure permanent office space, for example. “My experience has been better than others have had. I do have an office with a door,” says Strand. “Some lecturers get assigned to what is the equivalent of a broom closet. Others have to meet elsewhere on campus, like at a coffeehouse. If you’re dealing with private student issues, that can be challenging.”

“At Folsom Lake, adjuncts get one office with four computers,” says Baltimore. “At some of the other campuses, there’s a little room with a table in it.”

Some argue that the system creates a cadre of “freeway flyers” who patch together assorted assignments at different campuses in order to make a living, leaving them less available to meet with or mentor students because they’re constantly commuting.

“I think the current arrangement has a really strong impact on students,” says Baltimore. “At Los Rios, there is an office-hour program so you can get paid to hold office hours, but it’s not mandatory. When you’re hired as a part-time faculty member, the expectation is that you’re hired to teach a class, that’s it. You’re prepping for the class, you’re grading, you’re teaching, you’re leaving. You’re not required to meet with students, although most people do because they’re teachers.”

Administrators contend the negative impacts of contingent faculty on students are minimal. Students are more likely to reach out to instructors via email than during office hours, they argue. And most students aren’t aware of who has a temporary appointment versus a tenured position. Instructors are often hesitant to draw attention to the difference in status.

“I’d like to believe that students evaluate me based on their experience in my classroom,” says Strand. “I’d like to think that their experience in my classroom would be equivalent or even a little bit better because my primary role is teaching. I think the bigger issue is working toward equivalent working conditions and more stability for lecturers, and hopefully in doing so we might alleviate any concerns that students might have that we are less than.”

AS STRAND AND OTHERS SEE IT, the lack of job security and less-than-ideal working conditions in academia are emblematic of shifting public attitudes about the value of a college education. A 2017 survey by the Pew Research Center shows that 58 percent of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents believe that colleges and universities have a negative effect on the way things are going in the country, while just 36 percent say their effect is positive. Additionally, a 2017 poll by Civis Analytics indicates that 42 percent of Americans believe that college degrees are not worthwhile when weighed against student debt and poor job prospects.

“Based on the recent opinions about higher education among Republicans, I would guess that they would be surprised that there are professors at universities who struggle to pay their bills, not because they’re mismanaging their money but because their role at the university is considered temporary,” says Strand.

“The political climate has been shifting that way for a long time,” says Radican. “There’s a myth that we all make a lot of money and that type of thing, but they’re not understanding the challenges.”

“In terms of where education is right now, there seem to be voices out there that are trying to denigrate teachers and denigrate the whole institution,” says Baltimore. “I think it’s really unfair and unfounded.”

But Oppy isn’t so sure the criticism is completely undeserved. “I think right now we’re not appreciated. The bigger question is the why question. Some of that could be our own fault,” he asserts. “Maybe we don’t do enough to reach out to people who are not part of the ivory tower to say, ‘What are you looking for? What

would you like to see?’ The reality is that we should certainly be doing everything we can to bridge those gaps.”

WITHOUT A TENURED POSITION, Strand is unsure what the future holds for her, but she plans to continue to work for equity for lecturers. “I’m sure many people working in many jobs feel undercompensated, as I do, so I can’t say what I’ll be doing 25 years from now,” she says. “I really enjoy my classroom. I get paid to talk about cool science stuff. If I can continue to work to improve things and feel as though I have an upward trajectory, I can see myself staying at the CSU until I retire.”

As for Baltimore, he’s grateful for the rapport he’s been able to develop with other instructors in the departments in which he serves in spite of having to shuffle from campus to campus. “I have really good relationships with my full-time colleagues,” he says. Not everyone, he notes, has it as good as he does.

Radican, meanwhile, says it’s her students and fellow teachers who keep her going in spite of a system that leaves her feeling underappreciated. “Hope is always going to be found in the faces of the students. They are magnificent. And my colleagues, I love them dearly. The people are wonderful. If you’re called to be a teacher, you’re going to do it, no matter what.”

